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## THE PROBLEM OF TECHNICAL COMPOSITION

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The following extract from a recent letter to the *Harvard Alumni Bulletin*<sup>1</sup> deserves the attention of teachers of English composition:

A recent article lamented the fact that too often the students regard the English instructor as "a narrow specialist like the dentist." I have found that opinion among undergraduates in three universities where I have studied, and there seems to be justification for it.

Too often the English instructor is a narrow specialist in literary criticism, and as ignorant of practical affairs as the student is of literature. The student assumes that the instructor knows his business if he uses common words in a strange sense. If the technical meaning is in present, national, and reputable use, it is all right when the student questions the instructor about it. On the contrary, if a student uses a word in a sense strange to the instructor, and that sense is not contained in the desk-size of *Webster* or the *Standard*, that sense is all wrong, although it may be in present, national, and reputable use in a certain line of business.

A commerce student, who had worked a year in a bank, wrote a theme about the "Loaning of Money." "Loaning" drew the blue pencil—the instructor was not acquainted with banking terms. A college graduate who had been principal of a high school twelve years, and is now studying agriculture, wrote a theme about consolidated rural schools. In this theme, he used "Teacherage" for the house where the teachers live when the school is not in a village. Although this term is in present, national, and reputable use among educators, it was too new to "get by." Another "Ag" wrote about tilling the soil, and said, "the chief operations of preparing a seed-bed are plowing, harrowing, and disking." Seed-bed and disking drew the blue pencil—the instructor did not know a disc from a corrugated roller, but the best agricultural books use these terms and no synonyms are known. Another time an "Ag" student, writing on "Feeding of Balanced Rations," said that "bran, middlings, and tankage are needed to supplement corn for pigs." "Balanced ration" drew a question mark, while "middlings" and "tankage" were "too vague." It happens that middlings is a trade name for a flour by-product, just as definite as bran, while tankage for pigs is defined by law as to origin and composition. A student of ceramics engineering failed to "put over" the "Winning of Clays,"

<sup>1</sup> February 2, 1916.

yet three state universities give a course on the "Winning and Preparation of Clays."

I have seen enough awkward composition to keep the instructors busy instilling clearness, force, and ease without overruling meanings they know nothing about. One of them told me I had no right to put a certain meaning into a sentence, although he admitted it was clear as I had it.

Foreign observers say that the American people are suffering from the tyranny of the courts, in that the courts declare that legislatures have no right to pass new kinds of laws. If that be true, then the students of American universities are suffering from the tyranny of the English instructors.<sup>1</sup>

This letter discusses a long-standing source of irritation to the student whose English undergoes the criticism of an instructor in English. We instructors must admit that the objection of the technical student is too often valid. At least those of us who while in college had a strong interest in technical subjects such as mechanics or agriculture, finance or medicine, lost much faith in our instructors when they proved by their very words that they did not know what they were talking about, rode roughshod over our knowledge, and apparently ignored our sincerity.

In one instance among many the student was told to write an exposition. Since an explanation of a process is commonly taken to be exposition, the student showed how to make liquid soap according to the method of pharmacists. The word "tare," which was conveniently used, appeared objectionable because it might be denominated technical. Moreover, the total result was degraded because the instructor deemed the theme a scientific description. In other words, the instructor, without previous announcement to such effect, objected to a technical exposition, and, on the basis of the letter of the law in textbooks on rhetoric, rejected a technical word. He applied his legal principles too extensively. The fact that in so doing he was not altogether to blame will appear upon consideration of many circumstances. Yet these two points of his criticism merit strict examination as to their reasoning.

In regard to the use of technical words, the accepted practice is to use only such words as are known to the definite audience the student has in mind, with the instructor trying as far as as possible to represent that audience; or if the essay requires

<sup>1</sup> A brief reply, appearing in the *Bulletin*, February 23, states well the case of the instructor who represents the audience of the "general public."

scientific terms for the sake of brevity and of accuracy, to explain in the most fitting place the meaning of the expressions. Sometimes these explanations are made merely by words, sometimes by diagrams or photographs in addition. Then the instructor must exercise judgment as to usage if he has had training in the field under discussion and if he can himself provide a better substitute. In such cases he agreeably convinces the student that the improvement is actual. On the other hand, if he is not versed in the general subject, he can occasionally refer to friends acquainted with the technical aspect of the exercise; or he can see whether the student is able to explain clearly the meaning of the term; or he may familiarize himself with the policy of magazines like the *Engineering News* or *Metallurgical and Chemical Engineering*. Otherwise this instructor had best pass by the matter of technical words.

A further solution, not to permit any technical words or technical subjects, brings us to the second and more important point. The solution is not allowable in certain courses in general composition or in a general oversight of English. The reasons are obvious: to train men how to write clearly and correctly, one must permit the subjects to interest the men; and to help specialists who want to write on subjects other than aesthetics or literature, and not to compose short stories—to write, for instance, on loans—one must let them write frequently about matters within their special field.

This field presents its own problems of English when a writer or speaker has to address various audiences at some length. For the most part the instructor should here discuss and improve the larger aspects of the treatment, and be able to give convincing reasons for his suggestions. Thus one would consider the aim of the article, the adaptation to the audience, the proportion and position of parts, the character of introductions, transitions, summaries, diagrams, tables, and so on. Naturally he would devote attention to spelling, grammar, punctuation, sentence and paragraph structure, and general tone.<sup>1</sup> In this work he will find

<sup>1</sup> Textbooks that serve as guides for various branches of technical composition have been written by W. O. Sypherd, S. C. Earle, Rose Buhlig, I. E. Dwyer, Eleanora Banks, and others.

enough to do and he can be genuinely helpful to the student. So much the better if the instructor be acquainted with the special field.

Such is the course for the instructor to pursue. Why he does not do so in some cases is evident from the fact that more is expected of him than he desires or feels able to give.

Despite the high general average of generosity and sympathy on the part of English instructors, there are instructors in English composition who unfortunately see no reason why they should be interested in science, economics, politics, or history. Again, some hope eventually to be free of teaching English composition, and therefore spend their spare time in reading for the doctorate or for courses in literature. Furthermore, mistaken as they may be in this one-sided bias or absorption, they find that the monotonous work with composition draws in these days too small a salary for them to wish to continue in such ill-paying labor longer than necessary. Thus both natural inclination and financial necessity lead these instructors not to broaden their interests and not to be more directly helpful to all sorts of students of composition. From these men the technical student does not receive his due.

Moreover, this difficulty cannot usually be remedied by a solution sometimes offered—to have technically trained men for such special aspects. The salary of the college instructor in English composition is usually as low as that of any teacher of the same general rank and function, and too low for many technically trained men, who otherwise might teach English, to choose to do so when practical positions in engineering or finance offer a different kind of freedom and larger pay. Accordingly, until the ubiquitous impoverished college can pay the instructor in English well enough to make the occupation satisfactory for an indefinitely long time, the technical student is liable to meet instructors to whom the writer of the letter would object. But meanwhile instructors should try to eliminate the difficulty as far as possible by a broad sympathy and a properly directed efficiency.